

Incoming Evangelical Students

Over two-thirds of people in the U.S. claim Christianity broadly, while affiliating with one of Christianity's many traditions (e.g., Catholicism, Protestantism, Orthodox Christianity). Evangelicals are one subset of Christians that receive considerable attention by the media, often depicted in stories as an intolerant or hypocritical group (see, for example, Moran, 2016; Moscatello, 2016). Despite such public representation, little is known about the attitudes that evangelical young adults actually hold toward religious diversity in the United States. How do these students perceive individuals from other worldviews? Even more, how do they engage with religious diversity? With those questions in mind, this report focuses on evangelical Christian students' perceptions of and experiences with religious and worldview diversity upon entering college.

In fall 2015, just under 3,200 first-year college students identifying as evangelical Christians took part in the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS). IDEALS, a national study of college students attending 122 institutions across the United States, gauges college students' affinity for interreligious cooperation, their appreciation for various worldview groups, and their religious diversity experiences in higher education institutions. The study also provides insights regarding how students self-identify religiously, spiritually, and politically.

While some first-year evangelical students identified as either "religious" or "spiritual," the majority (75%) described themselves as "both religious and spiritual," and only 1.4% identified as "neither spiritual nor religious." Fourteen percent of evangelical respondents said they grew up in a multi-faith family. These students also leaned toward a conservative political ideology, with 40% of the first-year evangelicals identifying as "conservative" or "very conservative." Even so, 42% of respondents affirmed their "moderate" political orientation, and another 18% identified as "liberal" or "very liberal."

Like the IDEALS sample overall, most evangelical respondents said they are female (68%). In terms of race/ethnicity, however, evangelical respondents were distinct. Most commonly, these students identified as White (66%, compared to 59% of non-evangelicals) or African American/Black (11%, compared to 7% of non-evangelicals). Correspondingly, relative to their non-evangelical peers, smaller proportions of evangelical students described themselves as Asian/Pacific Islander (9%), Multiracial (9%), or Latino/a (5%). Evangelicals in the study chiefly indicated that they are heterosexual. Only four percent of the evangelical students identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, compared to the 12% of non-evangelicals who described themselves as such.

BACKGROUND AND ENGAGEMENT WITH WORLDVIEW

For first-year evangelical Christian college students, religion has played a distinct role in shaping their worldview. When asked to identify the factors that had the most important influence on their worldview, 90% of evangelical IDEALS respondents ranked "religious beliefs/faith" as one of the top three influencers. Family was also critical to the worldview development of incoming evangelical students. Eight out of ten evangelical first-year respondents indicated that "family background and traditions" constituted one of the top three factors shaping how they see the world. These students also stood out in their religious involvement and interfaith engagement: almost all (96%) attended religious services within their tradition in the year before college, and many attended an interfaith prayer vigil (21%) or participated in interfaith dialogue (26%) prior to starting college.

CONVERSATIONS ACROSS DIFFERENCE

Across the board, first-year evangelical Christian students seem slightly more prone to engage in conversations with people of differing backgrounds than entering students of other religious or nonreligious identities. Seventy-one percent of evangelical students indicated that, when having conversations with people of diverse religious or nonreligious perspectives, they discussed values the groups had in common. Additionally, 70% of evangelical IDEALS respondents reported pre-college engagement in conversations about differing values. In terms of experiences in the school environment before college, a majority of entering evangelical students had spoken about their worldview in class (56%) or with a teacher (57%), and 62% reported discussing religion in at least one of their high school classes. These students also had many informal interfaith interactions and conversations outside of school, with 74% discussing religious diversity with family or friends. Ninety percent said they had socialized with someone of a different religious or nonreligious perspective prior to their arrival at college.

EXPECTATIONS OF COLLEGE

Evangelical Christians generally expected their universities to provide a welcoming environment for people of diverse religions and races/ethnicities. Specifically, 82% felt that it was “important” or “very important” that campuses provide a welcoming environment for people of diverse religious and nonreligious perspectives, and 68% responded that it was “important” or “very important” that there be opportunities for interaction across worldview differences. Similar to other IDEALS respondents, evangelical Christians also felt that a welcoming environment for people of diverse racial backgrounds was “important” or “very important” (88%). However, evangelical students had lower expectations than other students for providing a welcoming environment for people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, with 61% rating it as “important” or “very important” (compared to 80% of other respondents) and 9% saying it was not important at all (compared to 3% of non-evangelicals).

APPRECIATION ACROSS DIFFERENCE

In general, incoming evangelical Christian students were less appreciative of religious identity groups other than their own. About 77% of evangelical IDEALS respondents reported highly appreciative attitudes toward evangelicals. In contrast, smaller numbers of evangelical first-year students expressed high levels of appreciation for Buddhists (40%), Hindus (36%), Muslims (34%), and atheists (29%). The conservative leaning of evangelical students was also evident in their varied appreciation for people of different political ideologies: 38% of evangelicals reported highly appreciative attitudes toward politically liberal people, and 51% were highly appreciative of politically conservative people. About one-third of the evangelicals surveyed reported high levels of appreciation for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people (34%) and transgender people (30%).

Despite inconsistent appreciation for other groups, many evangelical Christian first-year students form friendships across religious and political differences, albeit at rates lower than those of other entering college students. Eleven percent of evangelical respondents indicated that they had no friends of different religious or nonreligious perspectives, while only 7% of non-evangelicals said the same. Even so, potential exists for friendships as a means of evangelical interfaith engagement. At the outset of college, evangelical IDEALS respondents reported having at least one close friend in the following groups: atheist (57%), agnostic (41%), Jewish (32%), Muslim (24%), Mormon (22%), Buddhist (15%), Hindu (15%), or multifaith (11%). Additionally, evangelical Christians indicated having friends who are politically different from them (61%) and who have a different sexual orientation (52%).

PLURALISM ORIENTATION

Overall, incoming evangelical Christian students are oriented toward pluralism. Fifty-seven percent of evangelical IDEALS respondents ranked “high” on a scale reflecting “the extent to which students are accepting of others with different worldviews, believe that worldviews share many common values, consider it important to understand the differences between the world religions, and believe it is possible to have strong relationships with diverse others and still hold to their own worldviews” (Mayhew et al., 2016, p. 2). Another 43% scored “medium” on that pluralism scale.

First-year evangelical students also entered college recognizing the positive effects that interfaith work can have on the world’s problems. Of evangelical IDEALS respondents, 52% scored “medium” and 46% scored “high” on “Global Citizenship,” a scale reflecting their engagement with a global society through both action and reflection on global issues. Additionally, 71% of these students were “high” scorers on the “Goodwill/Acceptance Scale,” revealing that most have positive attitudes toward people whose worldview differs from theirs and believe cultivating interreligious understanding will make the world a more peaceful place. Highlighting potential opportunities for campuses to engage evangelical students across worldview difference, evangelical IDEALS respondents expressed a commitment to interfaith leadership and service: 64% scored “high” and 35% scored “medium” on the “Commitment to Interfaith Leadership and Service Scale”). Collectively, these data indicate that while incoming evangelical Christian students lean toward conservative ideologies, they are not intolerant of religious diversity, but instead are open to connection points across difference in order to make society a better space.

REFERENCES

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